

# EPA proposing emergency health declaration

*Move would allow government to remove asbestos-laden vermiculite insulation from Libby homes — without having to do the same thing in the rest of the country*

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency workers in Libby will ask their bosses in the Bush administration later this month to declare a public health emergency in Libby, a move that would allow the agency to remove asbestos-contaminated vermiculite insulation from hundreds of area homes.

The public health declaration is not a certainty and it poses many potential problems for the EPA and W.R. Grace and Co., the bankrupt multi-billion dollar corporation that owned Libby's vermiculite mine, which once produced the ore to make vermiculite insulation for homes, under the brand name Zonolite.

Before EPA officials in Washington make their final call on the emergency declaration, they'll have to take into account that up to 15 million homes nationwide are insulated with Zonolite. The public health emergency label would let the agency tackle Libby's insulation issues as a special case, and potentially save the EPA from having to remove the potentially toxic product from thousands of even millions of homes across the country.

Before the EPA makes its decision, W.R. Grace and Co. executives will meet with top agency officials on Jan. 11 to fight the proposal.

Paul Peronard, the EPA's on-scene coordinator in Libby, said at the Community Advisory Group

meeting in Libby on Jan. 10 that he and fellow workers are preparing a request for the declaration. Peronard said he believes Zonolite should be removed from Libby homes because residents have been exposed to dangerous tremolite asbestos fibers from a number of sources, not just the homes.

Peronard said he was writing a draft proposal for the health emergency declaration, which would allow the agency to remove Zonolite from Libby buildings without blinding it to such action nationwide.

Peronard said in an interview last week that saying Zonolite poses a health risk would be a major departure for the agency. For 20 years, the EPA has maintained that such insulation products are not dangerous if handled properly. The agency's longstanding advice on Zonolite is to leave it alone.

"If we decide there's a risk with Zonolite, from a policy perspective, it makes sense that we re-evaluate that for the rest of the country," Peronard said.

Discussion of a public health declaration for Libby began on Sept. 7, 2001, when EPA Administrator Christine Whitman visited the town and said her agency was looking at the emergency declaration as a way to remove asbestos-laden vermiculite from the town's homes. U.S. Rep. Dennis Rehberg, R-Mont., made a formal request for the declaration in



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Paul Peronard, right, EPA's on-scene coordinator in Libby, wants a public health emergency declared by Libby. At left is John Christensen, EPA's remedial project manager in Libby. See related story.

September, saying that Libby's health problems are unique in the United States and deserve special attention.

Peronard said the insulation

of the job.

Libby's problems with asbestos came to national attention in November, 1999, when newspapers began publishing accounts of sickness and deaths associated with asbestos.

A health survey conducted in 2000 and 2001 by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found that 18 percent of 6,600 adults tested had lung scarring likely related to asbestos.

While full production, Libby's mine produced a large portion of the world's vermiculite, which, when heated and expanded, was sold as Zonolite insulation. Grace operated the mine from 1963 to 1990. The company insists that dangerous asbestos was removed from the vermiculite in the mine to ensure the product's safety.

It is unknown how many homes in the United States are insulated with Zonolite. Estimates range from 600,000 to 15 million. It is known that many buildings in Libby are insulated with Zonolite because for decades residents breathed free vermiculite from the company.

Bill Corcoran, Grace's vice president for public and regulatory affairs, said in an interview with the Montanian on Jan. 10 that he asked for the meeting with EPA's on-scene coordinators on the emergency declaration because he wants to know the possible repercussions to the company. He said his main concern

lies in the fact that Zonolite has never before been labeled as an unsafe product.

"We believe it's a safe product," Corcoran said. Grace officials want to review EPA's scientific basis for the declaration, Corcoran said, and he noted that a judge in Washington state rejected claims that the insulation was unsafe.

"We want to be able to see we understand the science," said Corcoran.

Peronard, however, believes there are people who have been sickened from exposure primarily to Zonolite insulation. He pointed to the federal health study, which shows several sick people had primary asbestos exposure only through Zonolite. He also said that he knows of workers such as electricians who are now sick.

"Obviously, if we do something in Libby, people (nationwide) are going to say, 'Why didn't you do something with my situation,'" Peronard said.

Peronard said he expects to make his request to top EPA officials in Washington, D.C., this week. Marianne Harinko, assistant administrator for the EPA Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, will meet with Grace officials and make a decision on how to proceed.

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SDMS Document ID  
2032302